

Original Paper

Value Conflict and Personal Choice in *The Scarlet Letter* from the Perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism

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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne was the preeminent American Romantic writer of the 19th century. The Scarlet Letter, as Hawthorne's classic work, has been praised by most critics. Hawthorne paid attention to the ethical problems of Hester and Dimmesdale and gave a comprehensive depiction of their ethical choices after they had violated the Puritan ethical norms. This paper intends to use ethical literary criticism proposed by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, based on ethical dilemma and ethical choice, within the ethical backdrop of New England, to analyze ethical conflicts and ethical choices of the protagonists in the novel. Ultimately, it seeks to warn people the importance of complying with the ethical norms of the society. Exploring the ethical and moral values embedded in The Scarlet Letter will enhance the domestic study of Hawthorne's works and better realize the didactic function of literature.

Keywords

The Scarlet Letter, ethical literary criticism, ethic, Nathaniel Hawthorne

1. Ethical Environment in *The Scarlet Letter*

American religious historian Perry Miller described the Puritans of New England this way: "He was a soldier of Jehovah who came to the New World to build a perfect society." (Wu, 2011, p. 9) The Puritans who migrated to the New World were visionary individuals who aimed to establish a perfect society based on the Word of God. In the New England region, the Puritans fulfilled their religious ideals by establishing a theocracy of church and state. They practiced strict moral dogma, preached asceticism, and condemned the pursuit of earthly pleasures, and the narrow-mindedness and intolerance of their religious views began to emerge.

Objective ethical environment is the basis for understanding, interpreting and evaluating literature. The ethical environment of *The Scarlet Letter* is the Puritanical society of New England in the mid-

seventeenth century. Puritanism dominated and influenced people's lives in all aspects of politics and economy, religious beliefs, and behavior. On the political side, a theocracy was practiced, with church and secular leaders governing church members of low status. In terms of religious beliefs, it required absolute devotion, reverence, obedience to God, and strict adherence to Puritan doctrines and regulations. Morally and ethically, it required hard work, self-reliance, introspection and repentance. The Puritans were to practice asceticism and strive to become God's "chosen people." In a Puritan society under theocracy, the influence of the church and state system was deeply rooted in the people, and the slightest disobedience was met with harsh repression and punishment. Therefore, in the ethical environment of the ascetic Puritan society of the 17th century, Hester Prynne's adultery was forbidden.

2. Ethical Value Conflicts in *The Scarlet Letter*

2.1 Hester's Ethical Identity Dilemma

An ethical identity dilemma Hester faced was how to deal with her relationship with Pearl. On the one hand, Pearl was a symbol of the high price she had paid for her freedom and happiness and continuation of her love for Dimmesdale. As the mother of Pearl, Hester strived to uphold her rights and assume her ethical responsibilities. She did not want to give up her rights as a mother or avoid the ethical responsibility of raising her daughter. On the other hand, Pearl was the result of her adultery with Dimmesdale, a symbol of her sins and a living red letter. It was Pearl's birth that brought Hester's sins to light and subjected her to the harsh punishment of the Puritans. When Hester walked out of the prison door in front of the crowd of onlookers, she subconsciously tried to use Pearl's body to cover the red letters embroidered on her chest, and immediately understood the futility of her action, because the meaning of Pearl and the red letters were connected. The novel had written several times about the kind of affinity Pearl had with the red characters. The first time she opened her eyes and saw something other than "mother's smile", it was the red letter. For Hester, Pearl was another red letter "A", but Pearl was even more of a supervisor. Pearl's actions were a constant reminder of the sins Hester had committed and left Hester without a moment's peace and security.

Another ethical identity dilemma Hester faced was how to deal with her relationships with Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. Paul in Ephesians used a profound metaphor to illustrate the idea of the "oneness of husband and wife." He said that the relationship between husband and wife was the same as the relationship between the head and body. The duties and responsibilities of husband and wife in marriage were mutual. Between Hester and Chillingworth, there was no love. Hester was young and vigorous, while Chillingworth was deformed and old. Chillingworth chose Hester as his wife, partly because he longed to make her his private property and use her to light his lonely and desolate heart. Hester agreed to marry Chillingworth mainly because she was unworldly and thought that a quiet life by his side was happiness. The patriarchal Puritan society emphasized marital fidelity and the sanctity of the family, especially the wife's fidelity to her husband. Under Puritanism, a wife must be faithful to her husband, whether or not there is love between them, and whether or not the husband is dead or alive. Although

there was no love in Hester's marriage to Chillingworth, the fact that Hester was Chillingworth's wife did not change. Hester must therefore be faithful to Chillingworth, as dictated by the responsibilities and the indissoluble sanctity of marriage in a Christian marriage. When Chillingworth arrived in the colony and learned of Hester's adultery, he was unwilling to suffer the humiliation of an unfaithful woman and forced Hester to reveal the name of her adulterer. At this point, Hester was caught in an ethical identity dilemma, one being her husband in the legal sense and the other being her husband in her mind. According to the ethical norms of society at that time, as the legal wife of Chillingworth, she had to obey her legal husband's request to keep his identity a secret; while as the husband of her own heart, Hester had to let Dimmesdale know that her husband had returned and to take revenge on him.

2.2 Dimmesdale's Ethical Identity Dilemma

Dimmesdale was a young minister who graduated from a prestigious British university. Before sin arose, the environment in which he grew up and lived was mostly church and God, so his primary ethical identity would have been that of a clergyman, a believer in God. He was not only a highly respected pastor, but also a devout Puritan. Yet Dimmesdale, knowing his sin, did not repent publicly, as Hester had done, but chose to conceal the truth. The reason for this lies mainly in the confusion of his ethical identity.

The ethical identity dilemma faced by Dimmesdale was one of devotion to God and desire for humanity. As an orthodox theologically educated minister with strong religious beliefs and authority, Dimmesdale was a representative of the Puritan bourgeoisie and a defender of the Puritan moral order. In the Puritan society of that time, the priest was in a leading position and therefore was more bound by the moral laws of the society. (Kaul, 1986, pp. 9-20) Dimmesdale, who was deeply revered by his parishioners, always saw the service of God as the only noble goal, so such a devout clergyman was not supposed to have physical relations with any woman according to religious doctrine and moral requirements. Dimmesdale also faced the ethical identity problem of fatherhood versus priesthood. To be a priest, he must conceal his sins, and his fatherhood was not disclosed; to be a father, he could not continue to be a priest. Although at first Dimmesdale concealed the crime and failed to assume the corresponding legal responsibility and the responsibility of raising Pearl.

3. Ethical Choices in *The Scarlet Letter*

3.1 Hester's Ethical Return

Hester's repentance was incomplete, and when she saw Dimmesdale driven to the brink of madness by Chillingworth, she proposed to run away with Dimmesdale when she met with him in the forest. From the ethical point of Puritanism, Hester was guilty because she was swayed by her primitive lusts violated the sacred Puritan ethics, and deserved to be condemned. In the end, Hester's plan to escape ultimately failed after Dimmesdale's public confession. The priest's words finally awakened Hester to the fact that in such a puritanical society, any form of resistance would be useless. Only true repentance could cleanse the soul and gain God's salvation. Hester, who had tried to persuade Dimmesdale to flee to a free and

beautiful place together and live a happy life as a family, finally gave up her happy life with her daughter in Europe and returned to the seaside cottage where she had been humiliated and isolated from the world, picking up the shame she had abandoned long ago, and this is the ethical choice Hester finally made. Living here was more real than living with her daughter in a strange and foreign home, so she returned and wore the red letter that symbolized shame again. Whenever people encountered emotional problems or other confusion, they “brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and besought her counsel.” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 249) Hester would do her best to comfort and guide them with her years of insight. Hester’s seven years of solitude led her to make ethical choices from her heart. At the time of her trial, Hester was not shackled to the Puritan settlement. She could have gone far away or could have gone into hiding to find a new life, but she did not take off the red “A” and decided to stay with her daughter in a society full of coldness and hostility. Hester endured discrimination and ridicule; she persisted in her good deeds without complaint: “None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty.” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 149) She earned the respect of everyone for her tenacity diligence and kindness. The “A” on her chest was slowly transformed from the original adultery to acceptance, able and admiration.

Literature is a product of history, and the interpretation and understanding of literature must return to its ethical context. (Nie, 2010, pp. 12-21) Hester’s ethical return is a return to the ethical norms of Puritan society. In Hawthorne’s view, this independence and freedom of the subject obtained by suppressing desires and limiting needs can only be an abstract rational freedom, and likewise, the inner peace and virtue achieved by escaping social constraints and ignoring the system of rituals and laws is hollow and empty. True freedom does not lie in escaping or confining oneself to one’s subjectivity to abandon ethics. Hester’s return is in line with the specific ethical environment of the time, and also embodies the ethical edification function of literature, and is sufficient to express Hawthorne’s profound ethical and moral intentions.

3.2 Dimmesdale’s Public Confession

Dimmesdale did not think of confessing his sins at first, for the reason that the Bible did not require public confession; at the same time, if he did, he would lose his ministry and his social status, so he concealed his sins at first. When Reverend Wilson asked Dimmesdale to deal with Hester and ask her to stop hiding the name of the one who had tempted her to fall, he “considered it were wronging the very nature of woman to force her to lay open her heart’s secrets.” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 60) When Hester refused to give any information, Dimmesdale “drew back, with a long respiration.” (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 63) Dimmesdale’s heart did not want Hester to confess herself, although he was well aware that sin is sin and it had to be made public. For James’ admonition had penetrated to the very marrow of the Puritan bones: “Confess your faults, and pray for the forgiveness of others, that you may be saved.” (James, p. 1082)

The ethical identity changes with the ethical environment. Nie Zhenzhao (2006) and Dimmesdale’s ethical identity changed since he committed adultery with Hester. Therefore, Dimmesdale faced a

problem of ethical choice from the very beginning: to be a priest, he could not be a lover and a father, and to be a lover and a father, he could not be a priest. According to the ethical norms of the time, the final establishment of his ethical identity must be achieved by public confession, and a closer reading of the text revealed that there were three ethical dilemmas in Dimmesdale's ethical identity choices: whether he can hide his sins, whether he can confess them privately, and whether he can just walk away. Deep down, Dimmesdale initially wanted to hide his sins because he "still maintained a zeal for God's glory and man's welfare." (Hawthorne, 2019, p. 122) However, according to his education his position, and the ethical environment of the time, he should have known better than anyone whether he could conceal his sins. In the ethical environment of the time, public confession had become a fundamental canon and decree, and as a priest, Dimmesdale knew that it was not reasonable or justifiable to conceal sins. On more than one occasion, he, when ascending to the pulpit, wanted to say: "I, your pastor, whom you so reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!" (Hawthorne, 2019, p.133) If Dimmesdale had only confessed to Pastor Wilson in private, he would have ended up with excommunication, a public trial, and a public confession. Dimmesdale also confessed himself according to Roman Catholic doctrine, and he oftentimes had piled the bloody scourge on his shoulders, which did not lead to salvation. If Dimmesdale and Hester had run away together, according to the ethical norms of that time, the three of them would never be allowed to join the Church, and certainly not to integrate into society, let alone had any ethical identity. Moreover, the question of Pearl's identity was directly linked to his public confession.

As Hester's pastor, he could not continue their sins at her instigation, for the relationship between pastor and parishioner was one of the most fundamental ethical relationships between them, and it was his duty and obligation to help Hester to atone for her sins, and he "had a great responsibility for the soul of this woman. Therefore, it was up to him to exhort her to repent and confess, thus proving that his devotion to duty was not in vain." Therefore, he could no longer hide his identity; he had to appeal to his legitimate ethical identity and gave the world his true face in the form of a public confession, both to complete his repentance and to help Hester atone for her sins.

Dimmesdale did not choose to flee with Hester, but to cut off Hester's ideals using public confession. Dimmesdale made the ethical choice to give an account to society and his family by making a public confession that met the norms of the time. Dimmesdale chose to be brave and come forward with a public confession. At this point, he reached reconciliation with the world and completed his self-redemption. Above the platform, Dimmesdale's public confession was a defense of dogmatic doctrine and a testimony to his strong faith, through which he found the reality of God's existence. This public confession allowed Dimmesdale himself to tear off the mask of the much-admired priest and let the real him come to the front of the people. Although he had to face the accusations and discipline of the outside world, he had already realized the pilgrimage of selfhood and found the way to self-redeem. All of this stemmed from his sense of identity and his adherence to his faith, which was the bottom line he never wavered from, and the only ethical choice he made in making personal choices in the face of conflicting values. After

his death, Hester's repentance was no longer an obstacle, and she fully assumed her responsibility to Pearl.

4. Conclusion

Hawthorne is critical of the Puritan ethic's suppression of human nature, but his concern is not to criticize the Puritan ethic itself or to solve specific moral problems. His focus is to explore value conflict and their personal choice that people face when they violate the Puritan ethic. Hawthorne's description of the value conflict faced by Hester and Dimmesdale and the personal choice they made is not intended to deny the Puritan ethics, nor to judge right and wrong, but to show that the ethical rules of a certain society are the guarantee of the ethical order. As long as one lives in this society, one is bound to be governed by ethical rules, and any act that breaks the ethical rules will be punished.

The Scarlet Letter has a strong ethical and moral values. Through a series of ethical events, it highlights the fierce encounter between the human factor and the animal factor in human nature, ethical dilemma and ethical choice. It also reveals the importance of abiding by social moral norms. Writers should assume social responsibility, and the first importance of literature is to teach. (Nie, 2015, pp. 83-101) Hawthorne, who grew up in Puritan society, was deeply influenced by Puritanism, and his concern for ethical dilemmas and ethical choices of human beings inevitably emerged in the vast majority of his works. The use of ethical literary criticism to interpret the ethical conflicts and choices faced by characters in *The Scarlet Letter* provides a reference for us to interpret Hawthorne's other works.

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